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FRONT PAGE

Coalition to unveil visions for Delta

Water projects called
essential, overdue

By Nancy Vogel
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Imagine healthy runs of wild winter-run chinook salmon pushing up the Sacramento River. Floods sweeping harmlessly through Central Valley bypasses. Tourists flocking to Delta islands to watch birds. Droughts passing unnoticed — even with 20 million more people living here — because California has figured out how to conserve, trap, swap and recycle its way to water supply certainty.

That's the kind of California the people at CalFed envision.

In a major new report that opens with a quote from Vaclav Havel, president of the Czech Republic — "Either we have hope within us or we don't" — the 4-year-old consortium of federal and state policy-makers will bare its ideas before the public Monday. The 12-volume draft environmental impact report will spell out three main approaches to rejiggering California's water hub, the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta.

California's water industry doesn't underestimate the importance of these documents or CalFed's mission. Lately water leaders speak the same refrain: "We can't afford to fail."

"This is a chance of a lifetime," said Jason Peltier, who represents much of California's \$24 billion agriculture industry as executive director of the Central Valley Project Water Association.

All three of CalFed's proposals for the Delta include a huge investment in environmental restoration, bigger or new reservoirs, more places to bank water underground, pollution abatement, improved water conservation and levee strengthening. CalFed officials call all of it essential and overdue work, no matter what

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Water: Delta canal plan returns

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they choose to do to the tangled sloughs of the Delta that supply water to 22 million Californians.

What separates the three approaches is the volume of concrete they would require.

The most highly engineered of CalFed's ideas - Alternative 3 - would draw Sacramento River water down a new 44-mile canal to the federal and state water project pumps near Tracy that are the engines of California's water system.

The least-engineered alternative would place a few barriers in the south Delta to improve flows for fish.

CalFed's draft report doesn't pick a favorite. Instead, it tries to lay out the strengths and weaknesses of each.

The public will be asked to comment until June, then in late summer one approach will be picked by the CalFed leaders, who hail from such government agencies as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, California Department of Water Resources and state Department of Fish and Game.

CalFed staff rank the canal as tops in terms of its ability to guarantee water deliveries to Southern California and the San Joaquin Valley; to guard fish against the deadly pumps; to send the cleanest possible water to kitchen faucets; and to capture water during high flows.

But a canal's disadvantages rank just as high. Voters proved that in 1982 when they rejected a similarly configured "peripheral canal." Drawbacks still hinge on the intangibles that CalFed calls "assurances". Convincing people that once a canal is built, the rest of California won't abandon - politically or financially - the Delta's sagging levees and endangered fish.

"CalFed has made considerable

progress in preparing the concrete provisions of its plan," said Rich Golb, executive director of the Northern California Water Association, "but there's minimal progress made to date on the legal assurances."

For the Sacramento Valley growers Golb represents, that also means guarantees that a canal won't send water to Southern California for which it has no rights.

Then there is the question that dogs every aspect of CalFed's plans: Who pays?

CalFed very roughly estimates a canal at \$1 billion; environmental restoration alone could cost \$1 billion over the next 30 years.

CalFed Executive Director Lester Snow, former director of the San Diego County Water Authority, wants Californians to weigh the good and bad in the draft reports, search for ways to fix what's bad and figure out what they're willing to live with.

What Snow said he fears is a bumper-sticker war that oversimplifies CalFed's necessarily complex effort to safeguard water supplies for the world's seventh-largest economy at the same time it restores the biggest estuary on the West Coast, a brackish gateway that once ran thick with salmon.

"That's a challenge," said Snow, "keeping people off the symbols and on the substance."

So far the state's old-time water warriors - cities, farmers and environmentalists - still hope they'll improve their lot through CalFed. But they're barely hanging together.

Most disgruntled are the environmentalists. Recent skirmishes over an old battle - how to enforce a 1992 law that dedicates a portion of the federal Central Valley Project's water to fish - have left them sore at agribusiness. So has bickering over a \$1.3 billion water

bond that Gov. Pete Wilson had hoped to put on the June ballot.

The bond deadline passed as agribusiness and environmentalists sparred over whether the bond would include money for planning new reservoirs. Environmentalists long have argued that CalFed slights water conservation and farmland retirement in favor of new reservoirs.

"If CalFed were a student," said Gary Bobker of The Bay Institute, "I would say CalFed is a bright kid with a lot of potential who is recycling a lot of old ideas."

That dispute simmers, like so many others.

Urban and some farm water districts have made it clear they prefer a peripheral canal, but they divide over size and operation.

Some environmentalists believe market-based water transfers can meet long-term water needs; water districts are skeptical.

Farmers say they can't afford to pay much for more reservoirs or a canal, but environmentalists insist that whoever benefits ought to foot the bill.

There's no guarantee, either, that CalFed's valley-wide environmental restoration effort - touted as the largest in the nation - will build up salmon runs on rivers truncated by dams or restore a Delta swarming with non-native species. And there's no proof that the world's largest fish screens, which CalFed proposes, will work.

But for those involved, the scariest unknown is how the public will react.

"CalFed is about to leave the hands of the professional water community and enter the public and political realm," said Golb. "Success isn't going to depend upon what the lawyers and lobbyists think about the program. It'll depend on whether the public understands the need for a Bay-Delta solution."

A new fix for the Delta

CalFed, a team of federal and state policy-makers, will release on Monday a draft report showing the positive and negative aspects of three main approaches to improving the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta for both wildlife and the 22 million Californians who use it as a water source. Alternatives 2 and 3 could send Sacramento River water more directly to the two huge

pumping plants that draw water from Clifton Court Forebay in the south Delta. The pumps alter flows and kill migrating fish. All three alternatives include strengthening of Delta levees, new or bigger reservoirs, water quality and conservation programs, upper watershed improvements and Central Valley environmental restoration.

Alternative #1

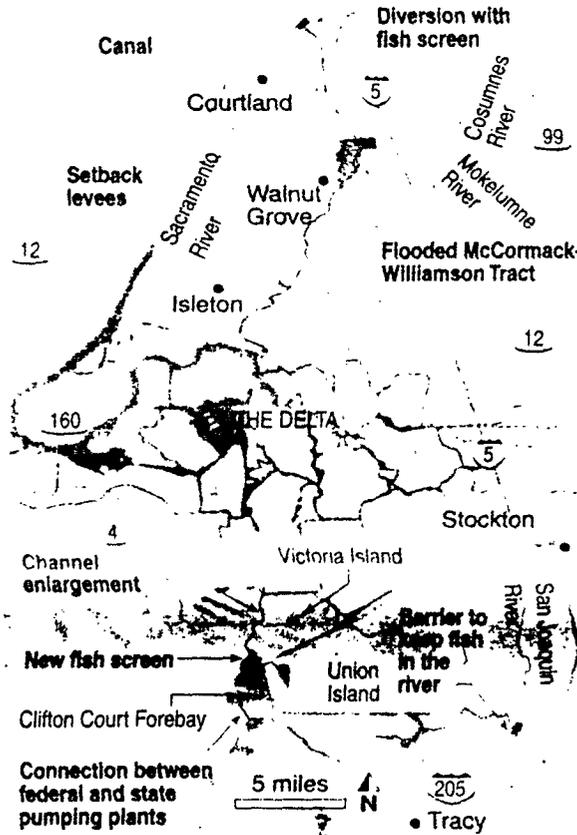
Does little to change existing Delta channels.

Alternative #2

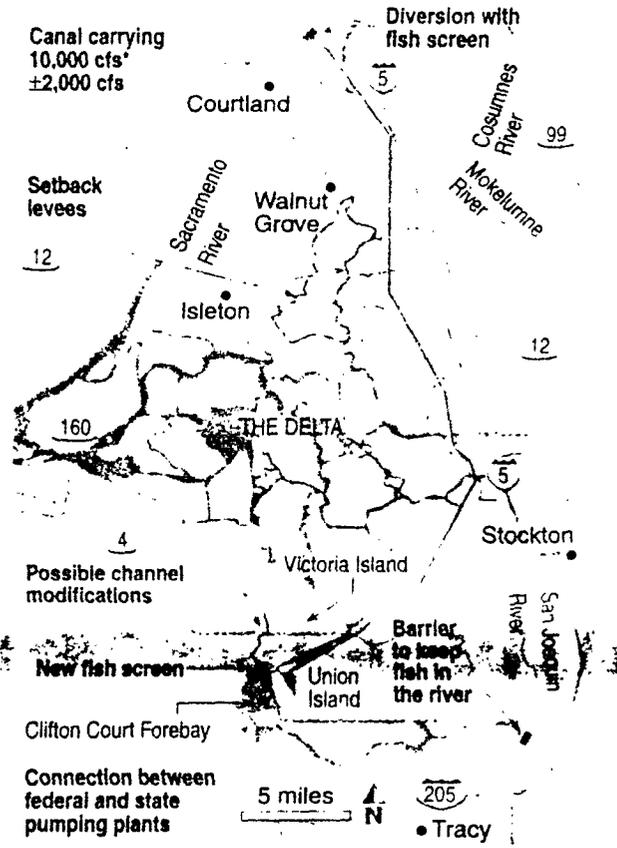
Includes a short canal from the Sacramento River and a widened Mokelumne River.

Alternative #3

Would divert water from the Sacramento River with a 44-mile canal that feeds water into project pumps.



Source: CalFed Bay-Delta Program



*Cubic feet per second

Bee graphic / Mitchell Brooks